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RECREATIVE CENTERS OF LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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The "playgrounds" of Los Angeles, although officially bearing that title, are more than the name implies. In reality, they combine the usual playground features with forms of social activity most often found at the settlement house. Hence, "recreative centers" will be found the more fitting term.

In September, 1904, a city playground commission was created by ordinance, which directed "That a commission to be known as the Board of Playground Commissioners, composed of five persons, of whom two shall be women and three shall be men, shall be appointed by the Mayor, to have charge of the public playgrounds of the city of Los Angeles. Said commissioners shall serve without compensation." They have authority to appoint a superintendent and other employees.

It was thought best to make a special department in which time and attention could be given wholly to studying and developing this new and important function of government, rather than to force the work on some old department as a side issue, where it might be neglected. The rapid growth of the work in spite of small funds (only about \$137,000 has been expended up to January, 1910), has shown the wisdom of specializing. With the Los Angeles charter revision, the commission will undoubtedly become a charter commission.

The Violet Street Playground, or Playground No. 1, as it was called, was opened in June, 1905. It was about two acres in size and cost in the neighborhood of \$11,000 for land and \$6000 for improvements. This center is open every day in the year, and is made attractive to persons of all ages. For the young children there are sandboxes, large kindergarten blocks and baby swings. For the girls there are swings, seesaws, maypoles, basketball, volleyball, croquet, tennis, etc. For the boys there are facilities for field sports, baseball, handball, basket-ball, also play apparatus and a large open-air gymnasium with roof to shelter from sun and rain and a floor

of soft tanbark to fall on. A small building contains hot and cold showers. For the mothers a summerhouse is provided, where they may sit and read or watch the children at play.

There are forty-five small gardens, for both boys and girls, where young gardeners grow flowers, also vegetables for home consumption. Under volunteer assistance a very successful "Park Department" was formed of children interested in this work. Care of the playground trees and plants was undertaken, as well. A system of marking for regularity in watering, weeding, caring for tools, etc., was inaugurated, and appropriate prizes awarded to those who received the highest number of points. Divided into two groups, the little gardeners also competed for their respective sides.

A very important part of the equipment is the clubhouse, a quaint bungalow in one corner of the grounds. This contains a large main room with stage, clubroom, storeroom and kitchen supplied with dishes and utensils for use in giving entertainments. In the afternoon children meet for sewing or other manual work, for games, drills and folk dancing, or musical organizations. In the evening those over 15 years of age form clubs in dramatic, musical and gymnastic work. On Saturday evenings except during summer months in this center, as in all the others, an excellent course of lectures, concerts and plays is given, for which many of the most talented people of the city generously give their services. The last Saturday evening of the month is reserved for home talent, when the children and young people give the entertainment. Certain evenings in the month, the clubhouse is reserved for parties given by groups connected with the center, the nearby public school, or any set of neighbors who may speak in advance.

The equipment of the center is completed by a pretty bungalow, the home of the director. Too much cannot be said for the benefits of this residence feature. The man and his family become an integral part of the neighborhood, and the influence of a well-ordered, hospitable home permeates the atmosphere of the center. Here, again, the settlement idea is exemplified.

The second Los Angeles playground was opened in May, 1907, and was a five-acre extension of Echo Park, bounded by four streets. Originally it was but a miserable hole in the ground, a detriment to the neighborhood. The Park Department kindly filled the tract and presented it to the Playground Department. Later they

added to their generosity by parking one end of the ground and edging the rest with a beautiful border of trees, shrubs and vines.

Echo Park Playground is equipped in much the same manner as the center just described, but being over twice the size, accommodates more apparatus and more visitors. Sometimes on Saturday afternoons there are as many as seven hundred children and young people at play, with several score of elders looking on.

An interesting development of this center is the Playground Republic, to which most of the children and young people, who are regular visitors, belong, although membership is not compulsory. The members elect their own president, judge, police and other officers, enact rules and have general charge of their enforcement. However, very little discipline is required on a well-supervised playground. The citizens pay a monthly tax of 5 cents. From this fund are bought athletic supplies, in addition to what the department furnishes. Inauguration of republic officers takes place on March 4, with serious public ceremonies.

The clubhouse of this center is an artistic structure, built when prices were very low, for about \$4000. The auditorium is 32 by 48 feet and has a stage extension. It is beautified with cheerful fireplace, built-in bookcases, window-seats, and windows on three sides. The house fronts upon the beautiful lake of Echo Park. An office, two clubrooms, a kitchen and two dressing-rooms are provided. The finish is of Oregon pine, oiled, the effect being very pleasing. In the basement is a workshop for boys, also a room containing box bowling alley. When the clubhouse was opened neighbors gave a number of good pictures, a bust of Lincoln and other furnishings. The playground director has made his home in the clubhouse, but a bungalow residence will soon be built for him. A large wading-pool will also be added to the equipment of the ground.

The social activities of the clubhouse are many and varied. Musical work is prominent, and includes a boys' band, a girls' band, an orchestra and a mandolin orchestra. The band instruments were donated to the playground. The young people pay a small fee to their musical leaders. Opportunities are also given children and older people for dramatic expression. At the recent Christmas celebration thirty-six girls gave a beautiful Christmas play under the leadership of volunteer helpers.

The Playground Commission early felt that the municipality should afford special recreational facilities for the working young men and young women and the adult population. It was determined to build what was termed a recreation center, to distinguish it from the playgrounds proper, as affording better means for indoor play, a house that should offer something of what the social settlement or Y. M. C. A. building furnishes. A corner lot, 200 by 120 feet to an alley, located in a central industrial district, was secured, costing less than \$9000. Of this amount \$1000 was subscribed by two industrial companies. Here was built a handsome brick-and-plaster structure in the Spanish Renaissance style, so prevalent in southern California. The building, which would ordinarily cost about \$30,000, was built when prices were low, and cost less than \$21,000. Equipment, including bowling alleys, amounted to about \$5600. The place was opened to the public in October, 1908.

The main feature of the building is a fully equipped gymnasium, measuring 44 by 74 feet, with windows on three sides. On the fourth side a large stage opens, for the gymnasium is also meant for use as an auditorium. Ordinarily the stage is closed off with rolling doors and is used as a clubroom. The gymnasium is two stories in height, a gallery furnished with a running track being located at the second story.

Other features of the building are, briefly, as follows: Ten marble shower-baths, modern locker-room, storeroom and furnace-room, two model bowling alleys, district nurse's headquarters, kitchen, two clubrooms, library; physical instructor's office, where measurements are taken and records kept; trellised roof-garden, which commands a magnificent panorama of the city and mountains and is equipped with sandbox and building blocks for children, and with electric lighting for evening socials; and last, but a very important factor, a pleasant five-room apartment for the manager. For here again the home rounds out the work of the center and establishes helpful relationships.

The recreation center is the scene of busy activity, afternoons being given over to the children, evenings to those over the age of 15. The gymnasium, baths and bowling alleys are used at certain times for men and boys, at other times for women and girls. The club organizations are particularly interested in dramatic and musical work and frequently give entertainments. The boys take pride in a

well-trained drum and bugle corps. Saturday evenings are given to the regular lecture and entertainment course.

The lot accommodates a small playground, simply equipped. Vines and shrubs add to the beauty of the center. In time it is planned to add another building to the original one, to contain an indoor plunge, additional showers, boys' workshop, larger club-rooms, etc. The present building will then be but one wing of the larger structure, which will surround a court on three sides.

The Playground Department aims to have these centers bring together kindred forms of municipal work. The public library was induced to place a playground branch at each of the three centers described, and to provide the services of a playground librarian, a woman specially fitted for this work. Each branch is open two afternoons and one evening a week. In all, about 1,500 books a month are circulated. Current magazines, also daily papers provided by the press, supply the reading-room. Checkers, authors and other quiet games may be enjoyed. From time to time volunteer helpers conduct a story-telling hour, scrapbook-making and similar lines of work.

Under the management of the College Settlement, the city supports a system of instructive district nursing. At the Violet Street Playground and the Recreation Center specially fitted-up rooms are furnished for the headquarters of two of the nurses. Here supplies are kept, calls for nurses are registered and some dispensary service rendered. The chief work of the nurses, of course, lies in the homes of the district, each nurse averaging sixteen visits a day. The nearby schools are also inspected by them.

Recently a municipal Band Commission has been created. This department co-operates with the centers by giving band concerts there as well as in the parks. The idea is to make the concerts of a high order and to give instruction concerning the music to be rendered.

Early in 1910 two new playgrounds will be opened. Of these, Hazard Playground contains about eleven acres. It will be particularly adapted to field sports and ball games. Tiers of seats on a natural slope will be built for large numbers to witness games, meets and festivals. The playground adjoins a tract of rolling ground of some fifteen acres, which is to be a park. It also adjoins a school site, where a new school will soon be built. It is proposed

to have a general scheme of landscaping, making the whole an ideal combination of school, park and playground. All of the land was a gift to the city some years ago.

Slauson Avenue Playground is a $4\frac{1}{2}$ -acre tract which the city Water Department kindly gave to the Playground Department to equip. It will have, when opened, about the same improvements that the Echo Park Playground now possesses, with running track in addition. As with the other grounds, trees, shrubs and flowers and a vine-covered fence will beautify the place. The clubhouse is a very artistic two-story building of plaster and half-timber style of architecture. The auditorium is 32 by 52 feet, the stage 20 by 24 feet. Trucks run under the stage to accommodate storage of chairs. There are two large connecting clubrooms, office, kitchen and dressing-room on the main floor. The lower floor contains showers for boys and for girls, boys' workshop, headquarters for district nurse, and space for two model bowling alleys, which will be furnished later on. The building cost about \$9000.

The two last-named playgrounds are in outlying sections of the city. These sections, owing to modern traction, are rapidly settling with small homes, and it is well that the grounds already belong to the public and do not have to be acquired later at great expense, and after a generation of children has grown up without them.

A sixth place, which will be called the Downey Avenue Playground, is also city land, and centrally located. Equipment will commence as soon as funds allow. It comprises $3\frac{1}{2}$ acres.

Plans are not yet completed for the development of Agricultural Park which comprises some 117 acres central to a large population, but it is probable that about six acres will be given the department for a playground like those described. Also, that a thirty-acre tract will be set aside for an athletic field, which will be used for big games, meets and play festivals of every description. This can be used by athletic organizations, by schools in playing off contests—in fact, by the whole city as a common. Moreover, contests between teams from various cities can take place here, making it a center for athletics in this section of the state.

With a present population of 350,000, and still growing, and with an area of 85.9 square miles, and still annexing, it will be seen that Los Angeles needs a great many play centers. It is hoped that within a few years several other well-located playgrounds may

be bought and added to the list, either by issuing bonds or by means of assessing districts. The municipal budget allowance for each of the last two fiscal years, for outlays, expenses and salaries, was \$40,000, and for the present fiscal year is \$45,000.

Besides the permanent grounds, five vacation playgrounds are conducted by the department during the summer. These are school grounds which have been equipped with swings, seesaws, maypoles, ladders, bars, slides, sandboxes and blocks, basket-ball, croquet, etc., at a cost of about \$400 each. In several cases a part of the sum has been raised by the children and the Parent-Teacher Association of the school. A competent man and woman conduct the activities at each ground. Story-telling hour in the big sandboxes is an interesting feature. The kindergarten rooms are used for folk dancing and for groups in basketry, sewing and other handiwork. Both children's and doll's clothing are made. At three grounds there are school baths, and these are operated. The play apparatus is allowed to remain permanently on the grounds, and the School Department has an attendant at each ground after school and for a half-day on Saturday during the school year.

At the close of each vacation all the permanent and vacation grounds have a great inter-playground field meet. There are no individual contests, but all entries are by teams of boys and girls, for this method encourages backward children and develops the spirit of co-operation. The car companies provide transportation for the teams. Each ground has its own color, which is combined with the general playground color, green. One of the newspapers awards a silver cup to the ground that scores the highest, and individuals and firms provide other prizes and pennants for events, all of which are kept at the several centers as trophies. The summer's handicraft work of all the grounds is exhibited in the club-house.

On May Day of 1909, was held the first annual play festival, all the grounds meeting at Echo Park Playground. About 15,000 visitors formed a hollow square, viewing with intense interest the beautiful exhibition of drills, games and folk dances. Children from the kindergartens and grades, older boys and girls from the high schools, groups from Y. M. C. A. and settlement, all took part, while the children of the various playgrounds carried out the picturesque old customs connected with the maypole dance and

crowning the Queen of May. Music was furnished by the playground band and orchestra and the *Examiner's* Newsboys' Band. In the evening another large throng enjoyed an exhibition of folk dancing as presented by the foreign colonies, in which Spanish, Indians, Germans, Syrians and others took part.

Various other holidays are celebrated at each of the centers. For Arbor Day the children of the nearby schools march to the grounds and engage in planting and in appropriate exercises. For Fourth of July patriotic exercises, band concerts and races are held. For Christmas there are evening entertainments, plays and Christmas-tree parties. Frequently kindergartens spend mornings at the playgrounds. Schools, churches, Sunday schools and orphanages often hold all-day picnics, and for these special games and sports are prepared in advance.

The work on the playgrounds is well systematized, for it is not sufficient to provide merely space and apparatus. The children are divided into junior, intermediate and senior divisions for various sports and games, and a great many match games are played. On the last Saturday afternoon of the month each ground tries out its own individual and team records in athletics. On the following Tuesday are posted the records of all the grounds, together with the world's amateur records.

At the beginning of its work the Playground Commission was able to secure as superintendent a man of college training, whose services have been invaluable. By his knowledge of the building trades he is able to save the department thousands of dollars each year. Still better, he is able so to organize the work of the grounds as to make it most effective.

On each playground there are a man and a woman director, and, of course, janitor service is provided. At the Recreation Center there is, in addition, for gymnasium classes, a physical instructor, who is employed by the hour. An accompanist, employed by the hour, aids the physical work at all of the grounds where music is needed. A mechanic does repair work at all the grounds, erects apparatus at new grounds and performs various odd services. Neat gray uniforms are worn by men and women directors. All men employed in the department must be non-smokers, or give up the habit if acquired, for the sake of consistent example to the boys.

Twice a month "play morning" is held, when the entire staff
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meets to practice games and talk over the work of the grounds. Once a month the staff, the volunteer workers and the commission meet at one of the centers for supper and evening conference, with city officials, educators and others interested in the work as frequent guests.

The staff is a splendid set of educated young men and young women, who are vitally interested in their work and full of the spirit of service. They are educators of children, not mere caretakers of property. Their salaries are not yet on a par with those of school circles, but in time they surely will be, for having a right director is probably 90 per cent. of a playground's effective service to a community, letting 10 per cent. represent the equipment. Quite a number of young women and a few men have volunteered their services for leading clubs and assisting on playgrounds at certain hours. This is a very helpful and pleasant feature. It is difficult to find trained directors; but the University of California has recently created a special course to fit men and women for this work, and Stanford University has also made a move in this direction. In time, it is hoped, the scarcity of trained workers on the Pacific coast may be relieved.

The superintendent has aided many schools and institutions with plans for playgrounds, and his advice is continually sought. Members of the commission and the superintendent are constantly called upon, both in and out of the city, to give addresses upon the subject of playgrounds. It is felt that the Los Angeles system has proven a great incentive to other cities of California to procure systems of their own. Many inquiries about the work are received, also, from other states.

From all sections of Los Angeles come clamors for local playgrounds, grounds within walking distance. The heartiest support is given to the movement by the people and the press. The other city departments are most helpful and generous toward this new municipal undertaking. The community is awakening to the fact that a city should seize its opportunity to make better citizens by providing recreation of the right kind and under proper auspices. Public conscience and common sense are becoming alive to the folly of sending boys eight years old and upward to reform schools to spend their minority at a cost of \$30 a month each, and this during a formative period when institutional life, at best, blights develop-

ment; whereas a well-supervised playground will direct the misused energy of dozens of boys into channels distinctly helpful to themselves and to the community.

Nor is the preventive side of the work alone appreciated. It is perceived that these centers are a constructive force in the community. Good health and good habits are promoted and the brain made clearer to act. Opportunity for expression in music, drama and other forms of art is given. The family may enjoy the centers as a whole; and this bond, where there is so much individualism in the American family, is a very important thing. Healthy, normal social intercourse is promoted, and this, again, is a matter of consequence in an American community, where, with mixture of nationalities and constant change of residence, there are often few opportunities for old-fashioned neighborliness or for social traditions to take root. Most important where the children are concerned is the fact that in playtime rather than in working hours is character formed; and here on the playground fair play must be constantly practiced, self-control constantly maintained. This is the very essence of democracy. For to know how to associate, how to co-operate with one's fellows is the foundation of our national form of government.